

ICONOGRAPHIES OF MEDIA POWER IN *SLAP THE MONSTER ON PAGE ONE*: VISUAL AFTERLIVES BETWEEN ITALIAN POLITICAL CINEMA AND THE CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPHERE

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the turbulent period of Italy's "Years of Lead" (*anni di piombo*), marked by political tensions and profound social upheavals, Marco Bellocchio released *Slap the Monster on Page One* (*Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina*, 1972), a film that dissects the mechanisms of media manipulation with an iconography of power that remains relevant today. Set during a wave of violence in Milan, the film tells the story of a newspaper editor, Bizanti, who decides to blame a young far-left activist for the murder of a young woman in an effort to influence the upcoming elections. This story was inspired by real events of the time—particularly the case of Pietro Valpreda, an anarchist falsely accused of a terrorist attack—and the fiction

sequences are interspersed with documentary images, such as footage of demonstrations in Milan. Starring Gian Maria Volonté, the film not only dramatises a case of scapegoating to sway an election but also introduces visual codes—the newsroom as a site of domination, the sensationalist construction of news stories, the creation of the *media monster*—that transcend its historical context. Bellocchio's work is notable for its incisive critique of structures of domination, particularly in relation to the media. *Slap the Monster on Page One* is no exception, as it forms part of a filmography marked by social commitment—from his first films in the 1960s such as *Fists in the Pocket* (*I pugni in tasca*, 1965) right up to *The Traitor* (*Il traditore*, 2019)—and an ethical approach to cinema as a tool for exposing reality.



News Item 01. Opening scene of the film, which appropriates archival footage of a far-right demonstration led by the then-president of the Italian Senate. Does Bellocchio suggest that there is a real monster on the front page?

The analysis proposed here is articulated along two conceptual lines. On one hand, Aby Warburg's notion of *Nachleben*—"the survival of gesture through time"—makes it possible to trace how certain visual motifs in the film, such as the claustrophobic dramatisation of the newsroom, reappear in contemporary journalistic practices. On the other, the notion of the "political-procedural film" (Mancino, 2008)—i.e. a film that interrogates official truths and requires an investigative gaze from the spectator—frames Bellocchio's strategy, which involves not just denouncing manipulation but also exposing its visual mechanics to foster critical scepticism of the media.

The relevance of these codes is amplified in the digital age. Contemporary news reporting and phenomena involving the viral dissemination of sensitive content replicate (often unconsciously) the sensory saturation exposed by Bellocchio: when witness accounts of violent or traumatic events are presented on social media, conflict is rendered visible, but there is also the risk of turning it into spectacle and trivial-

ising it. For all their democratising potential, platforms such as Twitter (now X) reproduce visual hierarchies analogous to those in the editorial office of *Il Giornale*: algorithms prioritise shocking images (sensationalist headlines, deepfakes), thus replicating an economy of attention that Bellocchio foreshadowed back in 1972. This paradox suggests that although formats change, media logics based on sensationalism and dehumanisation persist.

Interweaving film analysis, critical theory and digital studies, this study not only reinterprets Bellocchio's filmography but also interrogates the ethics of visual representation in a context where social networks and fact-checkers wage battles for nar-

rative control. This introduction thus lays the foundation for an urgently needed transdisciplinary dialogue. How can the banalisation of violence be resisted without rendering it invisible? Can cinema, as Godard suggested, continue to be a political tool in the age of algorithms? Such questions, latent in Bellocchio's film, acquire renewed significance at a time when the codes he dissected have mutated into memes, trending topics and disinformation wars.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Aby Warburg's Concept of *Nachleben* Applied to Film Analysis

The concept of *Nachleben der Antike* formulated by Aby Warburg refers to the "survival" or "afterlife" of images and gestures of the past in subsequent historical contexts. Warburg argued that certain visual and expressive patterns—especially those charged with intense emotional energy—persist across centuries, resurfacing with new meanings in different forms of cultural

expression, ranging from the visual arts to modern mass media (Warburg, 2010). Applied to film analysis, this perspective facilitates an investigation into how specific visual forms not only endure but are reactivated in modern contexts, updating historical conflicts and latent tensions. Marco Bellocchio's *Slap the Monster on Page One* offers fertile ground for this approach, as it preserves iconographies of power—such as the rhetorical use of framing in the depiction of judges, police officers and journalists—and visual motifs associated with the stigmatisation of the public enemy, whose genealogy extends back beyond 1970s Italy. In this way, the film not only engages with the political-media context of its time but also reactivates a broader visual repertoire connected to historical struggles over the control of the image, the manipulation of the body and the construction of truth. A Warburgian reading views the film as a constellation of archetypal gestures and images that reappear in the present with new forms and meanings.

2.2. Mancino's Notion of Political-Procedural Cinema

One of the most frequent criticisms of Marco Bellocchio by the extra-parliamentary leftist press was not so much about the content of his films as about how they were received and disseminated on official circuits. As Della Casa and Manera point out, "Bellocchio was not attacked for the content of his films themselves, but for the way his work was received in a film distribution and promotion system deemed bourgeois and conformist" (2012). This criticism reveals a fundamental contradiction: the figure of the committed auteur who nonetheless ends up being validated by the cultural structures of the very capitalist system he seeks to question.

In contrast to pamphleteering or explicitly militant political films, Anton Giulio Mancino proposes the category of the *political-procedural film* to refer to works that instead of offering un-

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equivocal answers raise questions and encourage the spectator to adopt a critical, investigative approach. Like the *giallo* or police procedural, films of this kind are articulated through ambiguous signs, fragmentary clues and divergent versions of events, charging the spectator with the task of deciphering the strategies of concealment and manipulation at work in the public sphere (Mancino, 2008).

Slap the Monster on Page One fits perfectly into this framework as a film that not only denounces the spectacularisation of crime and the instrumentalisation of fear by the media but also proposes a radical interrogation of the very nature of the image and its power to construct reality. Bellocchio deconstructs the codes of sensationalist journalism and exposes the symbolic operations that depict certain bodies—especially those that are marginalised, subaltern, or presumed guilty—as objects of public repulsion. This political-procedural logic, converging with the *Nachleben* approach, reveals not only the mechanisms of media power but also the visual genealogy of its representational devices. The film thus becomes a sounding board where a critique of the present is intertwined with the persistent memory of images. The following sections (3 and 4) will apply these two converging approaches to analyse how the visual motifs of the newsroom (*Nachleben*) force the spectator to engage in a task of critical (political-procedural) decoding that sheds light on the genealogy of media manipulation.

3. ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS SLAP THE MONSTER ON PAGE ONE

The film *Slap the Monster on Page One* is set in the midst of the turbulent period of Italy's *anni di piombo*, marked by political tensions that the film dissects with its dramatic depiction of a scapegoating intended to influence some upcoming elections. It is essential to understand that Bellocchio's film starring Gian Maria Volonté interprets and combines various real events of the time, the most notable being the case of Pietro Valpreda, the anarchist who was falsely accused of orchestrating a terrorist attack. The director himself, who had belonged to the leftist group behind the newspaper *Lotta Continua* (mentioned in the film as a contrast to the journalism of *Il Giornale*), uses cinema as a tool for exposing reality. In fact, Bellocchio was already demonstrating his critical consistency in 1972 with the insertion of documentary footage (such as scenes of demonstrations in Milan), thus mixing elements of fiction and non-fiction. This approach establishes a political-procedural framework that compels us to analyse the newspaper's manipulation as a symptom of the instrumentalisation of fear in the public sphere.

3.1. The Site of Domination: The Newsroom as a Stage of Power

In *Slap the Monster on Page One*, the *Il Giornale* newsroom is presented as a microcosm of media power, where every visual element is carefully designed to communicate political meanings. It is crucial to note that the film immediately frames this site of domination as a target of attack. The opening sequence appropriates archival footage of a far-right demonstration, followed by riots culminating in the newspaper headquarters being bombed with Molotov cocktails. This *mise-en-scène* presents the newsroom as a vulnerable space. Far from contradicting its role as a centre of domination, this beginning highlights the profound political polarisation of the *anni di piombo*

and justifies the need for its editor, Bizanti, to assume total editorial control. The manipulation of the facts by *Il Giornale* as it fabricates a scapegoat to influence the elections is presented as a defensive response and restoration of order amidst a perception of chaos. The newspaper editor's presence is imposed both physically and discursively: the framing systematically places him in positions of authority, reinforcing his role as the epicentre of the apparatus of control.

Bellocchio then explores the internal functioning of power through key sequences that operate as clues to the manipulation. The first meeting of the editorial board, who discuss and decide on the headline and editorial direction the paper will take on the story, is a crucial power scene. The camera transitions from journalist to journalist, emphasising the chain of complicity and hierarchical pressure, where "truth" is fabricated by consensus before being investigated. This visual dynamic operates as a visual afterlife (*Nachleben*) of the iconography of historical meetings of the powerful, where collective decision-making masks the will of the individual (Bizanti). At the same time, the film presents this as a political-procedural clue that compels the spectator to question the institutional origins of the sensationalist message.

This visual logic of surveillance and the scene of power—analysed by Jordi Balló (2000) in his study on the iconographies of social control and expanded on in the volume edited by Salvadó and Balló (2023) examining the visibility of institutional power—is expressed in an interior architecture designed for supervision. The hierarchical arrangement of the *Il Giornale* headquarters exemplifies motifs discussed in the volume cited above, such as the "executive office" (where decisions are made) analysed by Àngel Quintana (2023), and the "control room" (perpetual evaluation) studied by Iván Pintor and Ana Aitana Fernández (2023), demonstrating how interior architecture reproduces ideological control in the media space. The layout of the desks, lined up in

an open, exposed space, contrasts with the inaccessibility of the executive office where key decisions are made. The panoptic arrangement of the newsroom, watched over by Bizanti, is not a mere staging device but a visual afterlife (*Nachleben*) of historical schemes of control and social stratification, whose expression in *Il Giornale* requires the spectator to adopt a political-procedural gaze to decipher the ideological architecture behind the medium. Typewriters, present in nearly every shot, transcend their instrumental function to become emblems of an ideological machinery and act as an ambiguous (political-procedural) clue revealing that sensationalist discourse is produced through the mechanical repetition of pre-designed messages, in a gesture that exposes the afterlife of an ideological apparatus. A particularly revealing scene shows Bizanti intervening directly in the drafting of a headline; the framing of his hands on the typewriter underscores his role as the architect of a manipulated reality. The lighting reinforces this critical reading: the desks are bathed in cold light while the rest of the space is shrouded in shadow, creating an oppressive atmosphere evocative of a prison environment. The rhythm of the actors' movements—marked by nervous shifts and hurried gestures—conveys the constant pressure weighing on the workers. The combination of these elements—hierarchical stratification, structural surveillance, technological symbolism and expressionist lighting—constructs an incisive critique of the journalistic space as a site of social manipulation. As Micciché (1989) observes, the film is fully inscribed in the tradition of Italian political cinema of the 1970s, when cinematic form became a vehicle for protest through a *mise-en-scène* charged with meaning.



News Item 02. Meeting of the editorial board of the newspaper *Il Giornale*: the compositional hierarchy suggests a panoptic control by the editor-in-chief, Bizanti (foreground, on the left) within the organisational structure

3.2. The Construction of the Manipulated News Story and the Iconographic Fabrication of the Media Monster

Not only is Bellocchio's visual treatment of this space central to the political-procedural genre—which investigates the fragmentary clues of reality—but also, through framing, it reveals the afterlife of the forensic gesture or the *punctum* (Barthes, 1980) that turns the scene into a medium of consumption.

This sequence is crucial because it shows how the mechanisms of power—in this case, para-policing or institutional power—align with the media narrative. The dehumanisation of the subject—the suspect, filmed in shadows and from high angles—is not merely a media strategy but a physical act of coercion, reinforcing Bellocchio's critique of the structure of domination.

This physical violence, which dehumanises the subject and turns him into a medium of consumption, is immediately replicated and amplified in the symbolic realm of the newspaper. One of the most significant aspects of *Slap the Monster on Page One* is its representation of the process of turning a real event—a young woman's murder—

into a manipulated, sensationalist news story. The filmmaker does not limit himself to denouncing this media distortion; he goes further by exposing the visual mechanisms that construct an official truth, inviting the spectator to distrust the images and adopt a critical approach to media messages.

Bellocchio reveals this process in a key sequence: the editorial meeting where the decision is made to blame the young anarchist. The camera alternates between wide shots of the chaotic, paper-strewn newsroom and close-ups of photographs of the suspect. The editors' selection of the anarchist's photograph, which reduces the individual to a threatening icon (Benjamin, 1936), again evokes the afterlife (*Nachleben*) of visual repertoires associated with the stigmatisation of the public enemy. The explicit presentation of this process invites the spectator to exercise a critical-procedural gaze, distrusting the image as unequivocal truth. As Susan Sontag (2003) points out, images of violence can be instrumentalised to instil fear and justify social exclusion.

Parallel to this visual manipulation, language is distorted as a converging mechanism, as illustrated in a scene where an editor, pressured by his superiors, rewrites an article. The camera focus-

es on his trembling hands as he crosses out the word "alleged" and replaces it with "confirmed", while Bizanti repeats in a voice-over: "We need certainties, not doubts." This action, captured in a sequence shot, reveals how language is perverted to fuel sensationalism, in line with Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's theory of manufacturing consent (1988). The lexical choice not only pre-emptively sentences the suspect but also imposes a binary narrative that eliminates all moral ambiguity.

The staging of information culminates in a press conference where Bizanti, illuminated by television spotlights, stands before a crowd of journalists. The cameras film him from low angles, exalting his figure as an unquestionable authority—a strategy that evokes the cult of the leader described by Roland Barthes (1980). This framing contrasts with subsequent shots of the suspect, filmed in shadows and from high angles, reduced to a body stripped of agency. Pierre Bourdieu (1996) analyses this dynamic as part of a parallel media reality in which truth is diluted with spectacle and disinformation.

The visual construction of the news in the film is a complex and sophisticated process that combines the selection of images, the manipulation of language and the mise-en-scène to create a sensationalist narrative. By showing this process explicitly, Bellocchio invites the spectator to adopt a critical gaze, as Mancino (2008) suggests for the political-procedural film. Far from being vestiges of the 1970s, these strategies continue to be used in journalism today, where the saturation of deepfakes and algorithm-generated headlines reinforce the need to question how the media shape—and distort—our perception of reality.

News Item 03. Editor-in-chief Bizanti instructs young editor Roveda on how to deconstruct and reconstruct headlines to give them a clear propagandistic connotation



The construction of the media monster emerges as a central strategy employed by *Il Giornale* to manipulate public opinion and reinforce its own narrative. Bellocchio deconstructs this process by showing how the suspect is transformed into a public enemy through the decontextualisation of images, the association of the subject with negative symbols, and the constant repetition of incriminating messages. This stigmatisation process, which involves an afterlife of the iconography of the scapegoat, is articulated on several levels.

The newspaper *Il Giornale* selects photographs of the young man in which his expression and posture, extracted from their original context, are presented as clues to his guilt. This strategy culminates in a sequence where his image is projected onto a wall of the newsroom, surrounded by newspaper clippings and graffiti with slogans such as “*Justicia Ya*” (“Justice Now”). The camera slowly zooms in on his face, distorted by the projection, while a voice-over enumerates a false list of criminal records. The decontextualisation of the suspect’s projected image, surrounded by incriminating slogans, underscores the transformation of the individual into a threatening spectre. This rhetorical device, which Didi-Huberman associates with the afterlife of decontextualised images, simultaneously serves as the clue that Bellocchio offers the audience to decipher the mechanism of media dehumanisation. The decontextualisation not only isolates gestures but recycles them in a new visual framework charged with political meanings. As Walter Benjamin (1936) points out, the *aestheticisation of politics* turns the image into an instrument of social control, sacrificing context for sensationalism.

The newspaper links the young man to symbols of violence and subversion, associating him with images of protests and radical banners. This technique reinforces public prejudices towards certain political and social sectors. According to Roland Barthes (1980), the selection of these im-

ages functions as a *punctum*: apparently neutral details—a piercing gaze, a raised fist—acquire meanings charged with connotations that criminalise the individual when they are inserted into a biased media narrative.

Once the narrative has been established through these negative symbols, the newspaper progresses toward the definitive confirmation of the public enemy. This strategy is expressed in headlines and articles that reinforce the young man’s guilt, consolidating a singular narrative. This approach, making use of the ideological filters described by Chomsky and Herman (1988), is exemplified by the systematic omission of his voice. In the only scene where the young man speaks directly—a dimly lit medium shot in his cell—the film cuts abruptly to an *Il Giornale* headline: “The Monster Has No Voice.” This saturation of manipulated images, together with the silencing of his perspective, shows how the media erase subjectivity to manufacture consensus. As Judith Butler (2009) notes with her notion of *schemas of intelligibility*, certain lives are excluded from the social contract by being reduced to voiceless bodies, serving as mere resources to fuel collective fear. In this way, the construction of the *media monster* in the film is a multifaceted process involving the corruption of the image, emotional manipulation, and public complicity. Bellocchio not only denounces these practices but also exposes their visual genealogy, inviting a critical reflection on how the media—then and now—create enemies in order to legitimise social control.

3.3. Dehumanisation and Schemas of Intelligibility: The Biopolitical Logic of Media Consensus

In this context of iconographic fabrication that reduces the suspect to a voiceless body stripped of agency, the dehumanisation of the young man is not merely a rhetorical strategy but a biopolitical mechanism (Foucault, 1976) that reduces his

body to a disposable object within the media-judicial machinery. According to Foucault, biopolitics regulates life through devices that classify which bodies deserve protection and which may be sacrificed in the name of public order. In the film, the newspaper *Il Giornale* activates this device by presenting the suspect as an existential threat, thereby justifying his exclusion from the social contract. The repetition of sensationalist headlines and their association with symbols of violence not only criminalise the young man but place him in a condition of precariousness (Butler, 2009), whereby his life loses ethical value and becomes merely a resource for consolidating narratives of power.

Butler extends this idea by pointing out that *schemas of intelligibility* determine which lives are considered grievable and which can be stigmatised. By decontextualising images of the young man and associating him with street violence, the media construct a body without a narrative, a precarious existence that can be persecuted without remorse. This dynamic reflects how biopolitics (Foucault) and precariousness (Butler) converge in the public sphere: the suspect is judged not for his actions but for his condition as a body outside the frame of the human, a monster fabricated to fuel fear and legitimise social control. The iconographic creation of the *media monster* in *Slap the Monster on Page One* is a complex and multifaceted process involving the manipulation of messages and images, the regulation of emotions, scapegoating and the corruption of justice. A detailed analysis of this process may better explain how the media can be used to manipulate public opinion and undermine democratic principles.



News Item 04. Front page of *Il Giornale*, presenting a dangerous far-left militant as guilty

4. CONTRAST WITH OTHER BELLOCCHIO FILMS: CONTINUITIES AND RUPTURES IN THE CRITIQUE OF MEDIA POWER

Marco Bellocchio's filmography provides a privileged vantage point to examine tensions between image, power and truth. Over six decades, the filmmaker has constantly criticised mechanisms of manipulation, especially those of the media, adapting his critical gaze to historical, technological and cultural changes. The contrast between *Slap the Monster on Page One* and more recent films such as *The Traitor* reveals not only the consistency of his critical perspective but also his capacity to update it for profoundly different contexts. *The Traitor* tells the story of Tommaso Buscetta, the Mafia's first *pentito*, to explore how the court system and the media turn his testimony into a spectacle. Far from the image of restorative justice, the media process transforms the trial into a stage where sensationalist headlines and television interviews reduce the ethical complexity of the character to a simplistic dichotomy: hero or traitor. This closely resembles the logic operating in *Slap the Monster on Page One*, where the *Il Giornale* newsroom constructs a manipulative narra-

tive by turning the suspect into the monster the public needed. The continuities between the two films are noteworthy. Both deal with the strategy of constructing the media monster: in the cases of both the marginalised youth wrongfully accused in the 1970s and the repentant mafioso in the 21st century, the key issue is how the media erase all moral ambiguity through selected images and simplified narratives. Furthermore, in both cases, Bellocchio highlights the intrinsic connection between the media apparatus and the centre of political/judicial power, which uses spectacularisation as a control strategy. This visual afterlife of the iconography of stigmatisation requires the spectator to adopt a political-procedural gaze in order to decipher the theatrical depiction of the trial underpinning the media “truth”.

Moreover, the spaces where power is exercised—the *Il Giornale* newsroom in one case, the courtroom in the other—are presented as theatrical stages, places where truth is performed more than sought, always under the gaze of cameras, judges or journalists. This use of an enclosed space as a metaphor for control is a clear afterlife of the architectural expression of surveillance, now applied to the public sphere.

However, significant ruptures also emerge. *The Traitor* introduces formal and thematic elements that reflect the transition to a new media age. The use of archival footage, the inclusion of television formats and narrative fragmentation respond to a postmodern digital ecosystem in which truth is diluted in fragmented formats that appeal to the spectator’s morbid curiosity. While *Slap the Monster on Page One* engages in a frontal attack on the media as an ideological apparatus at the service of power (print journalism), the discursive development of *The Traitor* targets post-modern spectacularisation, with a critique enriched by constant questioning: the theatrical depiction of the trial is questioned as mere entertainment, reflecting a subtler critique of the dissolution of truth in the hyperconnected world.

Bellocchio films Buscetta with a mixture of empathy and scepticism, suggesting that the media not only manipulate but also reveal, albeit ambiguously, aspects of a reality that justice cannot resolve on its own. This development is part of a broader evolution in the director’s work. In *Good Morning, Night* (Buongiorno, notte, 2003), the media appear not as active manipulators but as silent accomplices of institutional power. Conversely, *The Traitor* shifts the focus to a critique of post-modern spectacularisation, where truth dissolves into fragmented formats and narratives appealing more to morbid fascination than to analysis. Despite these shifts, certain iconographies remain: closed spaces as metaphors for control, the dehumanisation of subjects through the framing and editing, and the theatrical depiction of power all persist, although they are updated with new technical and discursive forms. Bellocchio’s camera continues to be a tool for critical deconstruction, now reinforced with contemporary strategies such as the use of archival footage, multiple screens and digital textures that broaden the scope of his critique in the era of hyperconnectivity.

In short, the contrast between *Slap the Monster on Page One* and *The Traitor* not only enhances the interpretation of both films but also highlights the filmmaker’s enduring relevance as a discomfiting witness to the transformations of media power. His filmography offers no definitive answers but raises the questions necessary to interrogate how, in any era, the media shape and distort our perception of reality.

5. CONTEMPORARY AFTERLIVES

5.1. From Paper to Digital Screen: the Persistence of Iconographic Patterns

The analysis of *Slap the Monster on Page One* reveals that the visual codes established in the film have not vanished over time. On the contrary, they have found new ways to manifest and per-

petuate themselves in the public sphere today, adapting to the dynamics and formats of digital journalism. Strategies such as the selection of images, the manipulation of language and the decontextualisation of information so central to the film continue to be common tools used to influence public opinion.

In digital journalism, the selection of images acquires even greater importance than it had in print journalism. Digital media compete to capture the user's attention in an oversaturated environment, using shocking images as a key resource for attracting clicks and generating engagement. However, this quest for visual impact often involves a biased selection that reinforces predetermined narratives, much like the choices made by the staff of *Il Giornale* in the film. Lev Manovich (2001) observed years ago that the digital image has a unique capacity to be manipulated and recombined, facilitating the creation of persuasive visual narratives.

In this context, recommendation algorithms are not neutral, as they are designed to prioritise content that generates engagement, often reinforcing sensationalist or stereotypical narratives. Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) analyses how searches on platforms such as Google yield biased results and how these platforms autocomplete phrases such as "why are black women so..." with harmful stereotypes, a phenomenon that updates the logic of sensationalist headlines in *Il Giornale*. Both cases illustrate how the logic of repetition and prejudice dissected by Bellocchio in 1972 is amplified today in the algorithmic repetition of prejudiced content, where digital technology distorts reality.

The decontextualisation of information has become a common practice in digital journalism, where news is fragmented and disseminated without the context necessary for comprehension. This fragmentation facilitates manipulation by isolating facts or statements to present them misleadingly.

LIKE BIZANTI DOES IN THE FILM, THOSE WHO SPREAD SUCH CONTENT SEEK TO FABRICATE AN ALTERNATIVE REALITY, NOW WITH TOOLS CAPABLE OF ERASING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

This mechanism, which in the film is expressed in the strategic selection of photographs to construct the suspect's guilt, finds a parallel and a technological update in deepfakes, involving the generation of hyperrealistic images or videos that show people performing actions or making statements that never actually occurred. This results in the decontextualisation not just of isolated gestures—as in the film—but of a whole body and identity. Like Bizanti (Gian Maria Volonté) does in the film, those who spread such content seek to fabricate an alternative reality, now with tools capable of erasing the boundaries between fact and fiction.

Recommendation algorithms also often reinforce this decontextualisation by providing users solely with information that confirms their prejudices, creating information bubbles that drastically reduce the diversity of opinions—a phenomenon analysed by Eli Pariser (2011). This dynamic amplifies the effects of visual strategies criticised by Bellocchio: while in 1972 the repetition of distorted headlines and photographs consolidated the *media monster*, today algorithms prioritise deepfakes and sensationalist viral content, reactivating the logic of stigmatisation on a global scale.

Beyond these specific strategies, the persistence of iconographic patterns is observable in the creation of contemporary media monsters. On social media platforms, any individual can become the target of smear campaigns and harassment through the spreading of defamatory rumours and images to destroy their reputation. The digital public sphere can be transformed into the site of a virtual lynching, breaching the pre-

sumption of innocence and the right to privacy, as Zizi Papacharissi (2010) demonstrates. The film's visual codes are adapted to new digital formats, acquiring new meanings. The visual hierarchy, previously expressed spatially in the layout of the newsroom, is now reflected in web design and algorithmic prioritisation.

5.2. Visual Unmasking Strategies: From Cinema to the Contemporary Public Sphere

Just as the film engages in a sharp critique of media manipulation, numerous contemporary collectives and activists use visual strategies to unmask fake news, propaganda and disinformation. This visual counter-discourse aims not only to expose manipulation tactics but also to foster a critical and aware approach to images circulating in the media.

The tools employed include fact-checking, image verification and the creation of alternative narratives. Fact-checking claims circulating online is one of the most widespread strategies; organisations such as *Snopes*,¹ *PolitiFact*² and *Maldita.es*³ analyse news and viral content, which often entails visual analysis as many fake news stories employ manipulated or decontextualised images to generate emotional impact.

Another key tool is image verification. Groups such as Bellingcat⁴ and Forensic Architecture⁵ employ digital forensic analysis techniques to confirm authenticity, identify manipulations and reconstruct the original context of images. Following Barthes (1980), this verification aims to recover the original *studium* of the photograph, thus preventing it from being used misleadingly.

Beyond reactive practices, the creation of alternative narratives constitutes a proactive strategy to counter disinformation. It involves generating and disseminating content that provides different perspectives on events, thereby challenging narratives imposed by major media outlets. Initiatives such as *Democracy Now!*⁶ or *The Intercept* produce this type of independent investigative journalism.

Other ethical responses include slow journalism—which prioritises depth and context over sensationalist immediacy—and collaborative narratives—where marginalised communities construct their own media representations. For example, slow journalism platforms such as *Delayed Gratification* and *The Correspondent* reclaim journalism's social function as a counterweight to sensationalism.

These practices, which Foucault (1976) would describe as *counter-conducts*, subvert the visual hierarchies of media power. Like contemporary counter-hegemonic strategies, Bellocchio's filmography can be understood as a laboratory of political imagination, where the critique of power is combined with the formulation of alternatives. These forms of visual resistance challenge the political economy of information based on extraction and control (Zuboff, 2019), turning the image into symbolically and materially disputed territory.

In short, visual unmasking strategies constitute active forms of resistance against manipulation. Like Bellocchio in his 1972 film, these collectives and activists use the image as a critical tool to challenge dominant narratives and promote a more conscious worldview.

6. CONCLUSIONS: AN ICONOGRAPHY FOR THE PRESENT, A CINEMA FOR THE FUTURE

Slap the Monster on Page One offers a powerful lesson on the need to cultivate a critical approach to the images that surround us, while affirming cinema's potential as a tool for social transformation. The visual codes examined in the film—spatial hierarchies, the construction of the *media monster* and emotional manipulation—are not relics of the past; they are reactivated today in phenomena such as sensationalist coverage of migration and, analogously, in certain dynamics of virtual lynching.

The depiction of migrants as invaders by some European media outlets—through decontextual-

ised images of crowds at borders accompanied by alarmist headlines—reproduces the dehumanisation strategy that Bellocchio exposes in his film. As Lilie Chouliaraki (2020) points out, these visual frames turn migrants into precarious bodies (Butler, 2010) excluded from public empathy.

Similarly, certain dynamics of online cancel culture, while often arising as mechanisms to denounce abuses by those in power, can lead to virtual lynchings. In such cases, the dynamic reproduces the narrative simplification exposed by Bellocchio: individuals are reduced to “monsters” through decontextualised screenshots, viral hashtags and simplified narratives. The afterlife of the iconographic gesture lies in the fact that in both cases—the institutional manipulation in the 1972 film and online scrutiny today—decontextualisation and visual stigmatisation erase the subject’s ethical complexity.

These examples reveal that media manipulation is not confined to the 1970s but is a structural logic adapted to the technologies and sensibilities of each era. Bellocchio’s film, far from being a mere historical record, serves as a critical lens for interpreting contemporary phenomena such as deep-fakes and algorithmic disinformation.

As Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) argues, the struggle for media justice in the 21st century requires not only the deconstruction of dominant narratives but also the generation of counter-images capable of restoring human complexity. In this context, cinema preserves its role as a site of resistance. Bellocchio’s films, together with the work of directors such as Agnès Varda and Ai Weiwei, have used the cinematic image to humanise people and challenge stereotypes imposed by major media outlets. His work serves as evidence of Godard’s (2008) suggestion that making political films means subverting the visual codes of power and expanding the schemas of intelligibility of the present.

In this way, *Slap the Monster on Page One* not only alerts us to the dangers of media manipula-

tion but inspires us to reimagine cinema—and the media—as an instrument for building a more ethical, plural and socially committed public sphere. ■

NOTES

- 1 *Snopes* (<https://www.snopes.com/>) is one of the oldest and most respected fact-checking websites on the internet. It is dedicated to verifying the truthfulness of urban legends, rumours, fake news and other information circulating online.
- 2 *PolitiFact* (<https://www.politifact.com/>) is a project of the *Tampa Bay Times* that verifies the accuracy of statements made by politicians and public figures in the United States.
- 3 *Maldita.es* (<https://maldita.es/>) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to fact-checking and combating disinformation in Spain. Its work focuses on verifying the truthfulness of claims circulating in conventional media, social media and political discourse, using rigorous and transparent methodologies.
- 4 *Bellingcat* (<https://www.bellingcat.com/>) is an international collective of researchers, investigators and journalists who use open-source methods and data analysis to investigate a wide range of issues, from armed conflicts and war crimes to disinformation and extremism.
- 5 *Forensic Architecture* (<https://forensic-architecture.org/>) is a research agency that conducts spatial and architectural investigations on behalf of civil society organisations, human rights groups and international organisations.
- 6 *Democracy Now!* (<https://www.democracynow.org/>) is an independent news program broadcast daily on radio, television and the internet. It offers a progressive perspective on world events, often giving a voice to people and groups ignored or marginalised by mainstream media.

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ICONOGRAPHIES OF MEDIA POWER IN SLAP THE MONSTER ON PAGE ONE: VISUAL AFTERLIVES BETWEEN ITALIAN POLITICAL CINEMA AND THE CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPHERE

Abstract

This article analyses the film *Slap the Monster on Page One* (Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina, Marco Bellocchio, 1972) as a paradigmatic example of Italian political cinema capable of establishing visual codes to represent media manipulation and power relations. Drawing on Aby Warburg's (2010) concept of *Nachleben* (afterlife) and Anton Giulio Mancino's (2008) notion of the political-procedural film, this study examines recurring visual motifs in the film, such as the representation of the newsroom as a stage of power, the visual construction of the news story and the iconographic fabrication of the *media monster*. It analyses the afterlives of these visual codes in the contemporary public sphere, in forms ranging from digital journalism to strategies of visual activism. The article concludes by reflecting on the relevance of the Italian filmmaker's work for understanding the relationship between cinema, the media and power in the current context.

Key words

Italian political cinema; Marco Bellocchio; Iconography; Visual motifs; *Nachleben*; Public sphere; Media manipulation.

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ICONOGRAFÍAS DEL PODER MEDIÁTICO EN NOTICIA DE UNA VIOLACIÓN EN PRIMERA PÁGINA: SUPERVIVENCIAS VISUALES ENTRE EL CINE POLÍTICO ITALIANO Y LA ESFERA PÚBLICA CONTEMPORÁNEA

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza el film *Noticia de una violación en primera página* (Bellocchio, 1972) como un ejemplo paradigmático del cine político italiano capaz de establecer códigos visuales para representar la manipulación mediática y las relaciones de poder. A partir del concepto de *Nachleben* (supervivencia) de Aby Warburg (2010) y la noción de película político-indiciaria de Anton Giulio Mancino (2008), se examinan los motivos visuales recurrentes en la película, como la representación de la redacción como escenario del poder, la construcción visual de la noticia y la fabricación iconográfica del *monstruo mediático*. Se analizan las supervivencias de estos códigos visuales en la esfera pública contemporánea, desde el periodismo digital hasta las estrategias de activismo visual. El artículo concluye reflexionando sobre la vigencia de la obra del cineasta italiano para comprender la relación entre cine, medios y poder en el contexto actual.

Palabras clave

Cine político italiano; Marco Bellocchio; Iconografía; Motivos visuales; *Nachleben*; Esfera pública; Manipulación mediática.

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